The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

SUE PATTERSON

Interviewed by: William D. Morgan

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Q: Miss Patterson is presently assigned to the National War College for senior training prior to her departure this summer as consul general and chief of the consular section in Guatemala. Miss Patterson joined the Foreign Service in 1974.

Miss Patterson, thank you for granting this interview. We'd like to talk about some of your experiences over the last 15 years. You have served in Tehran and in Milan, as well as several places in the Department. Let's start by telling us what brought you to the Foreign Service.

PATTERSON: I joined the Foreign Service in 1974. My former husband is also a Foreign Service officer. He joined the Foreign Service in 1971, following our experiences in the Peace Corps in Colombia. Those years when he was in the Foreign Service and I was not working, were the first times in my life that I hadn't been employed. I found that a difficult adjustment to make. I really enjoy working. I'm not either a nurse or a teacher, which are the best two professions to meld around a Foreign Service spouse. So with his encouragement, I took the Foreign Service exam and joined the Foreign Service, principally out of my desire to work and have a career that was compatible with his.

Q: When you were successful, or both before that and after, did you anticipate that perhaps the tandem assignment, as we now call it, might have presented a problem in future assignments or in the assignment you were in? Was it difficult, in other words, for a working couple to find the ideal assignments?

PATTERSON: At that time, there were very few tandem couples. I think there were only 15 or 20 couples in the Foreign Service at that time. It was not a terribly difficult problem for the personnel system to find posts that could accommodate two junior officers, each in a different cone. He was in the economic cone and I was in the consular cone. Subsequently, it has become a more difficult problem because there are so many more couples, many of whom have now become upper mid-level officers and senior officers. Obviously the number of assignment possibilities are fewer. It is no longer referent to us because we divorced several years ago for reasons unrelated to our Foreign Service careers.

Q: In summary, then, you think there is a successful route out there for tandem assignments.

PATTERSON: I think there is, but I think that with the great increase in numbers of tandem couples, those couples that are in different cones and perhaps different levels have an easier chance to find tandem assignments than those who are going through the track at about the same pace and with similar cones.

Q: In the case of your first assignment, as I understand it, right after training you went to Tehran, As a consular officer.

PATTERSON: That's correct. My first position there was as head of the American Services section. We had quite a growing number of American citizens during that time. It was 1974. The first big OPEC price hike came in October of 1973, so those were years of really rapid growth of the foreign population in Tehran.

Q: What kinds of experiences did you have as a brand-new officer? Not brand-new. Your Peace Corps experience obviously gave you some insights into foreign cultures and so on, but you were brand-new in the sense of a line-officer protecting American interests. What were some of your first impressions as a brand-new consular officer into that area?

PATTERSON: I think my first impression was being quite overwhelmed with both the variety in the daily work and the sheer quantity of work that I was expected to perform.

Q: Were you the only officer?

PATTERSON: I was the only officer in the American services section. I had four Iranian employees that I supervised. We had an estimated 20,000 American citizens in Tehran, within our consular district.

Q: Those were working there or were they dual nationals?

PATTERSON: Most of them were working there temporarily. Many of those working abroad for the first time in their lives, and this contributed greatly to the number and kinds of consular problems we had. Most were there in the oil-related industries. They had come, in large part, out of Texas and Louisiana.

Q: Was this the building up of the Shah's military-industrial base that we were encouraging him to do?

PATTERSON: Yes, that's right, and in extracting as much oil as they could, maximizing the efficiency there. Many of those people, as I say, had not had much experience living outside of the United States, and I think that many of their employers were inexperienced, as well, in the kinds of advice and preparation that they had to give to their employees to make a successful transition, especially to such a different culture as they were faced with in Iran.

Q: Did you participate in, or did they have any sort of training programs to help these Americans?

PATTERSON: Very few of the companies initially had training programs. As they began to have more and more employee-related problems, some of the larger companies, such as Bell Helicopter, developed training programs. The consulate did not participate in those.

Q: Did you sense you should have, maybe? Could you have been of help?

PATTERSON: We could have been of help, I think, certainly in helping them anticipate the kinds of problems that their employees came to speak to us about. I think, by and large, they were aware of those problems, though.

Q: What kinds of problems are we talking about, practically speaking?

PATTERSON: Practical problems were financial, for instance. They were offered what sounded like large salaries, but were not told the amount of expense that they were going to be faced with in Tehran. So while they thought they were going to be making a killing, in fact, they found out that they weren't perhaps even able to make ends meet comfortably. That was one of the recurring problems.

Q: How did that affect you, though, in protection and welfare? What were you protecting?

PATTERSON: They came to me to say, "I want to leave. My employer won't send me back home because I've signed a contract that commits me to stay here for two years. I can't make ends meet, I can't support my family. My family is unhappy, my kids aren't doing well in school. We want to go back to Louisiana. We don't have enough money to pay our way home. The company won't pay our way back. They say we owe them money for the house full of furniture that they've provided." There were legal entanglements to their freedom.

Q: You couldn't get involved in those, though, could you?

PATTERSON: Our role was limited to one of using our good offices. We couldn't, of course, force the employer or the employee, but kind of as a service to both parties, I sometimes made a phone call and said, "This appears to be a serious problem in the making here. Is there some way you can find to be more flexible?"

Q: Did it work?

PATTERSON: In many cases, yes, it did work. I think in many cases the company felt, "Okay, we do have the legal right to keep this family here, but in our overall interests of good relations with the community and morale of the other workers, we might do better just to get rid of this particular family which is poisoning the atmosphere."

Q: Did some of these issues, especially the more serious or institutional ones, get to other members of the embassy, to the ambassador and so on? How did the rest of the embassy react to some of these, as seen by you, the protection and welfare officer?

PATTERSON: That brings me to the other observation I was going to make. You asked, as a brand-new officer, what were my impressions. I said the first impression was the sheer quantity and variety of the work that I was expected to do.

The second was a feeling of being rather alone, not having the support of really anybody. I could talk over these problems with the Embassy employees, but I didn't feel that there was anybody willing or able to help me out when I felt so overwhelmed with the quantity of the work. There was little real feeling of moral support, or of interest in what was happening in the consular section.

Q: It sounds like supervision both immediately in your own section and maybe beyond into the embassy. Do you want to talk about that?

PATTERSON: Yes. My immediate supervisor was the consul general. We were very understaffed at that time because people had not foreseen the great build-up of work that there would be due to the oil price hike, both on the visa side and on the American Services side. So that was a problem that everybody was having to cope with. It was quite understandable.

What was less understandable was the person occupying that position of consul general, at least during my initial months there, a burned-out officer who was not doing any of the internal consular work. You could find him at most times during the day either reading a magazine or doing a crossword puzzle. It was very demoralizing to go from my office, which was a beehive of activity-we were working at full tilt from the moment we got in in the morning until we left-and walk across the hall to his office and find him working a crossword puzzle. He was not a good role model for an incoming officer.

Q: What does a first-tour officer do about such a revelation?

PATTERSON: One thing I did was resolve not to become that person. One of the ways that I have done this in my career is not to do consular work in all of my assignments. I have tried to alternate my consular work assignments with out-of-cone assignments, because I feel that doing a steady diet of consular work would lead me to burn out.

Q: As a digression to that very important point, do you think as you've gone on for subsequent years, that that's worked? In your other colleagues, have you seen the same thing happening? In other words, do you think it helps to avoid burn-out, and does the reverse cause burn-out?

PATTERSON: Yes, I think that was a good instinct of mine, and it's worked for me. Actually, it's not a subject that I've discussed that much with many colleagues, but I feel that the quality of consular officers who have been in the Service about the length that I have is pretty high, by and large. A variety of assignments is one of the things that either the Service has provided or that they themselves have initiated in that broader spectrum.

Q: Do you think the system understands that and wants to do this sort of thing in the consular field, to broaden the experiences of the individual?

PATTERSON: The system has never encouraged me to seek out-of-cone assignments with the purpose of avoiding consular burn out. It has encouraged people to take out-of-cone assignments to broaden their management experience and to broaden their capabilities for promotion, but it's been for those more standard professional motives, rather than for the personal emotional considerations.

Q: Very good. Maybe they both end up the same place, but in any event, the purposes are different. Yours, as seen by an individual having gone through this first experience, you fortunately profited very quickly by it.

Let's go back to Tehran before we get into some of these out-of-cone experiences. You had this first very revealing experience in terms of supervision from your American Services experience. The part of that that we haven't heard from is outside, in the rest of the embassy. Was there an awareness of this burned-out supervisor, an awareness of some of these other issues as they affected the total mission?

PATTERSON: I have to think there was awareness. They'd have to be blind not to be aware. There was not any attention paid to it so far as I could see. There may have been things going on at a higher level that I wasn't aware of, but I think largely the embassy-and by that, I mean the ambassador and the DCM-were focused on other issues. Things were very lively in Iran at that time, as is obvious with all the activities that were going on in OPEC, and their attention was almost 100% absorbed by those issues. I think that they felt the consular section would just have to limp along on its own as best it could.

Q: In other words, it did not, as far as you were concerned, recognize that the issues in protection of Americans were directly related to American presence in Iran, and that there were perhaps bigger problems around the bend, which indeed there were.

PATTERSON: There were, indeed. They may have recognized it, but if they did, they never talked to us about it. Neither the ambassador nor the DCM, during my two years there, ever came to the consular section even once. It was physically separated from the embassy, but it was just about three blocks away.

Q: How did you feel the section related to the whole mission? Was it isolated-period?

PATTERSON: The whole section was isolated, period. We would go over to the eating facility at the embassy, and in that context, sit down with other people working there. That was a good time to exchange views, and was an interface. But there was no formal way that encouraged cross-semination of views about what was happening, at least at the junior level.

Q: I presume you rotated out of the American Services section to somewhere in visas?

PATTERSON: Yes. We had a very busy non-immigrant visa section and an immigrant visa section. I was rotated out of the American Services into the immigrant visa section. As it happened, I did immigrant visas for the rest of my time there.

Q: So you were never in non-immigrant?

PATTERSON: I did non-immigrant visas only about a week when I was substituting for somebody there who was in the hospital for a while. So I was spared the long-term grind of a visa mill.

Q: Before we go to the immigrant visa experience, do you want to give a quick impression of the non-immigrant visa "mill," as you describe it?

PATTERSON: We had two non-immigrant visa mills in Tehran. One was for student applicants, of which there were tremendous numbers during that period. There was great impetus for Iranians to go to the United States to study, and we ended up issuing-I don't recall now-I think it was maybe 60,000 student visas a year during this time.

Q: Why were there so many students going to the United States?

PATTERSON: The Iranian university system was just not adequate for the numbers of students who wanted a university education. With the tremendous increase in economic wealth during that period, many more families were wanting to send their children to university, and there simply wasn't the capacity to absorb them in Iran. The favorite place to go during those years, outside of Iran, was the United States. It had replaced England and, prior to that, France, as the ideal destination.

It was felt, also, I think, that in terms of the petroleum industry and all the subsidiary industries that the U.S. university education was the most appropriate for creating engineers and all those technical professions that are needed.

Q: You are talking about volume. How about quality?

PATTERSON: Quality was not high, by and large. Most of the best qualified students wanted to stay in Iran, and it was largely those students who could not make it in their own university system who wanted to go abroad. Also, for many of these students, studying in a university abroad was a new aspiration on their part, and they really hadn't prepared properly in terms of language qualification. We had an informal cut-off of what was a 13-point grade average. That equaled about a "D" in our grading system.

Q: Could you handle a cut-off line? Was that considered legal?

PATTERSON: Well, it was not specifically endorsed by the Department, but we felt that if somebody could not maintain a "D" average in their own language, in their own familiar surroundings and living with their family and all of those community supports that help a person's stability, that such a person was unlikely to be a successful student in the United States, in a foreign culture, in a foreign language. Therefore, they would be more likely to drop out of school and become an illegal alien, perhaps working illegally.

Q: The other part of your mill you were describing, I presume, were all the non-student non-immigrant applications.

PATTERSON: The non-student applications, yes.

Q: Any observation on them?

PATTERSON: Normally in a visa mill post, the principal concern is whether the person intends to return to his homeland. This was not a big problem for us in Iran at that time, because things were booming so well. We didn't really have to be as concerned as consular officers are in some of the poorer countries, or as officers interviewing Iranian applicants now must be.

Our problem there was one of just sheer volume. The consular section was not physically able to handle the numbers of people that we had to accommodate each day, and we were never terribly successful at reconfiguring the consular section in such a way that we could handle that volume. We did build a student annex on the embassy compound. The student applicants were the more numerous of the two groups, and so those people, then, were physically not a burden at the consular section. But of the tourist applicants and other people going for medical assistance or whatever, we still had such a volume that they began to line up starting at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning, and we opened at 8:30.

Q: In addition to the volume, I suppose you had bona fides problems.

PATTERSON: We had some bona fides problems, but fraud was not one of our serious problems. Don't forget we're talking now back in 1974 to '76, when fraud was not "in" the way fraud is now. Fraud is a real sexy topic now. My most recent overseas experience was in Milan, where we had a very small fraud problem. I often felt like I was a bit of a disappointment to the Department because we had no significant fraud problems. The Department put such an emphasis on fraud, which was of course appropriate for many countries.

Q: Why do you suppose the Department felt this way?

PATTERSON: I think it was a reflection of the Reagan Administration's outlook on human nature, perhaps. That's too flip an answer, but waste, fraud, and mismanagement became kind of a slogan.

Q: It's called WFM, even an acronym that got pronounced. (Laughs)

PATTERSON: A slogan for all the government agencies. I think the stimulus for it was the budgetary problems, but I feel also it was a reflection of the philosophical outlook of the administration and perhaps, as well, their mistrust of the government worker.

Q: In your next assignment, Guatemala, you are perhaps going to face fraud a little more frequently than in Italy. I'm sure there are fraud elements there. Could I ask you to react to the argument that when you're looking at an issue which does exist-misrepresentation-that maybe the Department was looking for ways to make it easier for the officers to handle this, trying to structure it so that it's something that you could come more to grips with?

PATTERSON: Yes, I think that they were. The stimulus was a positive one. They are trying to enhance one's awareness of it. That was perhaps lacking in a widespread way back in the mid-seventies, when I say fraud wasn't "in" the way it became under the Reagan Administration. I'm not saying that they've been wrong in emphasizing the subject of fraud; I'm saying that in Tehran at that time and in Milan, when I was there subsequently, fraud was not a serious problem. It will be a serious problem in certain aspects of the work in Guatemala.

Q: You'll probably meet your quota.

PATTERSON: No doubt. It's not something that I look forward to greatly. But I am told that non-immigrant visa fraud, at least as of three or four years ago, was not as serious a problem in Guatemala as it is in some equally poor countries that are a little farther away, because for $90 for a bus ticket, you could get to the border of the United States and come in, just walk across the border. So you didn't have to take a chance on applying for a visa and being refused.

Q: Let's go back to Tehran now for the second part of your assignment there, which was the immigrant visa function, with which you can speak with great experience. You are now a year into Foreign Service experience, you now know what your boss is like, you know what the embassy is like. Tell us how you faced, with all this awareness, the immigrant visa function and what the issues were there.

PATTERSON: The principal issue that we faced in the immigrant visa section was one of people wanting to go on an immigrant visa to the United States, without really intending to emigrate there. What they were really looking for was to have a "green card" as an insurance policy. I think they felt (correctly, it seems) that the well-being in Iran might not last forever, and they wanted to have another option in the future, should that become necessary. So they sought an immigrant visa for the United States. It was kind of a prestigious thing to have in those days, as well, a status symbol.

Q: If you conclude this, you must have deduced from your interviews and from your awareness of their motivation, some rather interesting socio-political insights into the country as to what was going to happen. If you did gain some of these insights at the time, how did you share them with your colleagues?

PATTERSON: In all honesty, I have to say that I didn't gain the kinds of insights with enough accuracy that I would have predicted what did, in fact, happen. I think there was widespread uncertainty that the good times would last, but I did not ever intuit the kind of widespread dissatisfaction with the Shah's regime that apparently was felt. I spoke Farsi fairly fluently, and I conducted all my interviews in Farsi, but perhaps because of the kinds of questions I was asking, or their cultural mistrust of telling their true feelings to anybody outside their immediate family group, I was not privy to that kind of dissatisfaction.

Q: Did they feel, perhaps, too, that because of the extensive secret police apparatus in the Iranian Government, that there might be people in the American Embassy that would misuse their information?

PATTERSON: Yes, I think that fear was widely shared.

Q: Do you think you had some other employees in your employee?

PATTERSON: Yes, I do. At the time there was one employee who we felt fairly certainly was, in fact, working for the Iranian Secret Police. There may have been others of which we were unaware.

Q: Speaking of Foreign Service nationals, how did you evaluate their performance? What comments do you have about Foreign Service nationals as employees in what was, in this case, a very delicate mission?

PATTERSON: I have a very high regard, by and large, for our Foreign Service nationals. The extent to which we rely on them is great, and I think we go in with an initial need to trust them. If they begin to seem unreliable, then we move back from that trust. But I, at least, have never approached Foreign Service national employees with the thought, "They've got to earn my trust." I have relied on them because they have so much more continuity in their job, in how things can be done in that country, and how things have worked in the section in the past. Their knowledge of all those things is so much greater than that of a brand-new consular officer. I have relied on them greatly.

Q: What happens when you do discover that either the performance is not up to the standards you feel it should be or other problems? What did you do then?

PATTERSON: That's tough, because in many countries we don't have much latitude for getting rid of them or for rotating them into some other position where they may perform better.

I had a difficult situation in Milan with two employees at different times, neither of whom was performing up to standard. I was able to work out a premature retirement for one.

Q: When you say "we," I presume you mean you worked with the personnel officer or the administrative officer?

PATTERSON: That's correct.

Q: What kind of a relationship was that? Could you find support?

PATTERSON: Oh, yes. That was very constructive, both with the administrative officer post and with personnel officer in Rome.

Q: So these were performance problems. Any other kinds of issues about FSNs that you would generalize on from your two overseas assignments?

PATTERSON: I spent three years in Tehran, two of them working at the consulate. They were very intense years. I have, from that time, only three Iranian friends that I would take some pains to keep in touch with and visit or travel out of my way to see. Three people out of a three-year space in one's life is not really very many. But of those three people, two of them were employees in the consulate. So that kind of a trust and liking and shared experience was really very valuable to me, and I keep up with those people still.

Q: This is both professional and personal, you feel?

PATTERSON: It was professional in Iran. It's subsequently become personal. There was little social relationship during the time in Iran. It didn't seem appropriate. Subsequently, they both have immigrated to the States and there is now more of a social friendship. I say this just to point out that I feel that the intensity of the work relationship between the Foreign Service officer and the Foreign Service national is such that it's very conducive to a trusting relationship.

Q: And yet as the responsible American officer versus a foreign national subordinate, you feel that that relationship is most management, I take it from what you said, but you have to do certain things to make sure it works. Can you give us a few examples of that?

PATTERSON: Yes. You cannot become personal friends with one or two of your employees. I think it's clear in your own mind which ones you rely on the most. But it's necessary to maintain proper relations and professional relations with all FSNs.

Q: You don't feel, then, it's a serious problem or something that a young officer especially can not easily manage?

PATTERSON: No, I think it's something that a young officer can manage. It may be something that a young officer has to remind himself or herself of from time to time-it's easy to come in young and enthusiastic, wanting to embrace a new culture, and working daily with the FSNs, people who represent that culture be drawn into a more friendly relationship than it should be, to maintain a professional relationship at the office.

Q: And with good supervision, which I hope was better when you got to your Milan assignment, you can be helped by your colleagues and your supervisors on this relationship.

PATTERSON: Yes, you can be. I think a savvy supervisor is tuned into that.

Q: Before we leave Tehran, it's my understanding that in the immigrant visa job, you had some related work with refugees, some Kurds. Can you tell us something about that?

PATTERSON: This was the most memorable part of my work in Tehran. Actually, there were two very memorable things that I did in Tehran, and I'd like to tell you about the other one, as well.

But as far as the Kurds, in 1975 the Shah and the leader of Iraq signed, quite unexpectedly, a border agreement. Prior to that, the Shah had been supporting the Kurdish rebels in their struggle against the Iraqi Government to try to get a more autonomous state. The Kurds had not wanted to undertake this struggle on their own, and the Shah had promised them assistance. When the border agreement was signed, the Kurds were left out in the cold. Part of the terms of the border agreement were that Kurds on either side of the border had 120 days to get to whichever side of the border they wanted to be on. So there were many Iraqi Kurds who came into Iran because they did not trust the Iraqi Government to live up to the commitments it had made to Iran to ensure their safety. To my knowledge, there were no Iranian Kurds who crossed the border in the other direction.In any case, there were many thousands of Kurds-I don't recall right now how many, over 100,000 Iraqi Kurds-who came into Iran during the time that was permitted. Many of those came without a desire to remain permanently in Iran. Some of those came perhaps thinking they would remain permanently in Iran, but then did not find a very welcoming atmosphere there. They were kept in camps, by and large, at least those who were not able to find work or not given work permits to go out and seek work. Some of them felt that they could do better in another country. Many of them made their way to the embassy and said they wanted to go to the United States. At that point, they were referred to Mrs. Patterson, who was in charge of immigration.

Q: They weren't coming as refugees, in our rubric; just people who wished to go live in America?

PATTERSON: They just presented themselves in their naive fashion, saying, "We want to go to the United States." The guard at the embassy gate didn't introduce them to me as refugees, but, in fact, I discovered after talking with them that they were. That was another difficulty, talking with them. In our consular section, there was language capability, in maybe 12 languages, but Kurdish was not one of them, unfortunately. That was a really difficult thing, because these Kurds, by and large, spoke no other language. Some of them spoke Assyrian, and a few of them spoke a few words of Farsi, but talking with them was extremely difficult.

Initially, with the first ones who came, it was very hard for me to even figure out who they were and what they wanted. But I struggled through because I liked the way they were. They were different from the Iranians just in their bearing and in the way they looked at me straight in the face. And as the numbers grew and grew-the first day I may have had one or two, and then before long, there were maybe 1,000 or more in all, with 20-30 coming every day.

Q: The word got out, "Go see Miss Patterson."

PATTERSON: Right. I knew that under the definition of "refugee" at that time, there was a category for refugees in the Middle East, and the Kurds fell into that category. So I sent off cables to the State Department saying, "We have these people presenting themselves. They qualify under the definition. What should we do about them?"

The State Department had a difficult time in responding in part, because there were virtually no Kurds in the United States at that time. To my knowledge, there was only one. So there were no groups lobbying on their behalf, in the first place, and in the second place, voluntary agencies didn't have any communities to tap into to find sponsors.

So the Department, first of all, had to make the decision as to whether we could free up some refugee numbers to help them. Secondly, once they decided positively on that, before we could begin processing them, they had to find voluntary agencies who were willing to find sponsors for them.

I was unaware at that time of all these processes that had to be worked out, and I wasn't sure what was going on back in Washington. But I did know I wasn't getting answers. So I sent off cables every week or two weeks, and had to tell these people, "Come back. We don't have an answer. Come back." So they did; they kept coming back. That meant that my problem never went away. Anyway, I persevered, they persevered, and eventually we did get a response from the Department, saying, "Yes, we have authorized this program."

Q: So, in fact, you were then authorized to process Kurdish refugees.

PATTERSON: That's correct. I would like to add that during this waiting time, my feeling was that we did not owe anything in particular to the Kurds. I thought it would be nice if we could help them because they did fall within our definition of refugees, but I was not aware of any particular commitment we had made to them.

Subsequently, while we were processing these refugees, the one Kurd who was in the United States sent me a copy of the Village Voice, which had printed excerpts from the Pike Commission report. At that time, it became clear that we, in fact, had made a very serious commitment to these people.

Q: Who is "we" in this sense?

PATTERSON: The U.S. Government. The Kurds had agreed to resume their war for autonomy against the Iraqi Government with support from the Shah of Iran, but they did not really trust that the Shah would continue to provide his support. As it turns out, there concern was well-founded. So they sought the assurance of the United States Government that we would, in effect, guarantee that the Shah would continue to support them and that we would throw in a little support of our own.

According to the Pike Commission report, Henry Kissinger made this commitment to Mr. Barzani, who was the leader of the Kurds at that time.

Q: At the time, Kissinger was Secretary of State?

PATTERSON: No, I believe he was Director of NSC at that time. As I recall from the Pike Commission report, he instructed the CIA to carry out this covert operation. The CIA was opposed to it. They felt it was a misuse of the Kurds, because our goal was not really to help the Kurds win. We didn't think they could do that, and even if they could, I guess we didn't think it was desirable. The CIA maintained that unless our goal for the Kurds was honorable, it was a misuse of them, encouraging them in a policy that would be destructive for them, to resume this struggle against the Iraqi Government.So the CIA did not undertake this activity willingly, but as I understand it, were ordered to do it. At a minimum, the ambassador, Richard Helms, and the chief of station at that time were aware of the commitment we had made to the Kurds, a commitment the U.S. government was unable to keep. When the Shah decided to sign the border agreement with Iraq, his support of the Kurds stopped. Our guarantee that such a thing would not happen turned out to be of no value whatever.

When I read this article that my friend here in the States had sent from the Village Voice, I really felt like a patsy. The ambassador and the chief of station left me alone to face the people we had sort of betrayed second-hand, without informing me of even the broad outlines of the background of U.S. government involvement.

Q: Had you ever gone to them to ask?

PATTERSON: No, it did not occur to me.

Q: How could you expect there to be a communication on this subject?

PATTERSON: They saw my cables that were going to the Dept. asking for guidance.

Q: Did they?

PATTERSON: Yes, I am sure that they were at least aware of the fact that there were 25 or 30 Kurdish refugees appearing at our consular section every day. In fact, at one point during this time, I ran across the chief of station in the parking lot, and he made a point of coming over to me and saying, "Sue, I want you to know I really admire what you're trying to do for the Kurds." I was kind of mystified by that comment. But when I read the Village Voice, I understood what he was talking about. I can understand Ambassador Helms' reasoning that I didn't need to know everything, but it would have been helpful for me to put things into perspective if I had been aware of at least the broad outlines of our policy over the preceding two years to the Kurds.

Q: Once this came out more openly, if you will, and you got the article and the answer back from the Department, then did the ambassador's attitude on this change at all? Did he communicate with you?

PATTERSON: No, he did not. In all candor, I must say I did not go to him and pound his desk and say, "Why didn't you tell me?" Ambassador Helms is an awesome figure, and I felt, the most junior of junior officers.

Q: Nobody in between that you could share this with? Not your section chief, we've established that.

PATTERSON: By this time I had another section chief, who was an improvement over the original one. He gave much more moral support. I can't honestly recall if I went to him to say, "Why didn't the ambassador talk to me about this?"

Q: But there's the substance, as well as the interrelationship. There's the substance of what you consider, and there's obviously historically a very important reality. It wasn't just whether the man as ambassador was a strong person or not; it was that there was an issue out there that affected the whole mission, as I see it.

PATTERSON: There was. I can't explain what his motives of silence were, but there was a complicating factor here, perhaps, in that my husband was the petroleum officer at that time. He worked day in and day out with Ambassador Helms. They had a very close relationship, and that was a relationship that needed to be kept on good terms. I don't remember consciously thinking, "Don't rock the boat on this because it could jeopardize that relationship." It may have been an unconscious consideration of mine.

In any case, I was overwhelmed at this point, and needed to get on with the program and make it work.

Q: And did you? Did the program get on its way?

PATTERSON: The program got on its way. It was one of the most satisfying things that I've done in my career. I had the help of an excellent man from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, a British man named Leslie Goodyear. His principal function was to work with the Iranian Government representatives to get travel documents for the Kurds we accepted, get them permission to exit Iran, and work also with the German Government. We couldn't issue the final refugee documents in Tehran; we did the pre-processing there. The refugees who were accepted went to Frankfurt for their final processing by the Immigration Service, so we had to work out the entry visas into Germany. Mr. Goodyear took care of that.

Q: We couldn't have an INS officer stationed in Tehran?

PATTERSON: We could have and it was considered, I believe. But it was decided, for whatever reasons, that the processing would be handled in Germany. I think, in retrospect, it would have been more efficient to have the immigration officer come to Tehran. I believe that's the way we would handle it now. The Immigration Service has become more flexible in that regard. But at that time, to my knowledge, they didn't send immigration officers outside of their permanent posts for refugee processing.

Q: For the remainder of your tour there, how many Kurds were processed?

PATTERSON: We had 750 numbers, and that meant one number per family. Most of the Kurds were young single men, but those that weren't were old married men who had 12 or 13 children, so in all, there may have been 1,000 or 1,200 people we processed.

The other person who was very key to making this program work was a magnificent Kurdish man by the name of Shofiq Qazzaz, who had been a resident in the United States in previous years and was very fluent in English. He was very much wired into the Iraqi Kurdish community. He was able to not only talk to the people about what their desires were, what their professions were, but he also knew enough about the United States to be able to make some kind of assessment of who might fit in, who had the skill or the initiative or the guts or whatever to make it in the United States.

We had no guidelines, in contrast to most refugee programs, as to who we could take and who we could not take. Our first priority was obviously people with relatives in the United States, but there wasn't anybody in that category, because, as I say, there was only this one Iraqi Kurdish man in the United States. People who had been educated in the United States, that category didn't help us either. So we were left, really, with the numbers to use for anybody.

Q: They probably had no skills particular either.

PATTERSON: By and large, they had no skills. So Shofiq did us all a wonderful service in culling through the people who wanted to come and figuring out who might best fit where, because there were other countries who had agreed to take some Kurds. The Germans agreed and the Swedes took a handful. In fact, there were several European countries taking from this group, although the U.S. took the largest numbers.

We started the processing in May of 1976, but we ran this whole program on a very short time frame, because the numbers expired at the end of June, due to the fiscal year. When we started the processing, we were not aware of that. I think it was the middle of June, when we got a cable saying, "Anybody who's going to get taken has to get processed by the end of June." I was departing Iran on July 1, so it was a hellacious period. But it was work I did gladly, because I really believed that the Kurds were going to be good immigrants to the United States. I didn't feel that about all of the Iranian immigrants who qualified.

Q: Sounds like you put your emotion into adjudication, Miss Patterson.

PATTERSON: Yes, I had an emotional investment in this program.

Q: You said you had two things you wanted to tell us about.

PATTERSON: Yes. The other program I was involved in, which was largely at my own initiative, was an adoption program. There were a lot of Iranian babies who needed homes, and there were many American couples living in Iran who wanted to adopt. Those children are really quite beautiful.The way I got involved, obviously, was through the immigrant visa that the American families needed for the child they adopted. The difficulty for them was to meet the requirements of the immigration law in terms of a permanent adoption. Under Iranian law at that time, there was no such thing as adoption-perhaps this is Islamic law. A child could be given to somebody who was not an immediate family member only in temporary custody. But temporary custody did not fulfill the requirements of our immigration law.

I was working with an Iranian judge who spoke very good English and had some experience in the United States. We tried to devise a system where families could adopt an Iranian child under some kind of judicial procedure that would meet the requirements of the Immigration Act. The Iranian Parliament was undertaking a new child custody law, and the judge was trying to get language into it that would help us.

The new law came out and did allow for permanent adoption, but a home study had to be done on any potential adopting family. That presented a problem for the American families because there were very few Iranian social workers at that time to do any kind of social work, and none who could do a valid home study of an English-speaking family. So I found a qualified American social worker living in Tehran and she found several others. It was really quite surprising, the number of qualified Americans who happened to be residents in Iran at the time, who had degrees in social work and had experience in performing and evaluating home studies.

Q: And were looking, maybe, for work.

PATTERSON: They were very happy to do this. We set up an unofficial coordinating group of the Social workers. They sent copies of their documents such as school degrees and previous employment records, and we put all the red ribbons and seals and said, "Yes, these are validated documents," and sent them over to the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry said, "Yes, we will accept the findings of their home studies." That's how we got this process rolling.

Q: You did this all on your own?

PATTERSON: Yes. I had the backing of my supervisor.

Q: A first-tour officer!

PATTERSON: I will say, had I not been there and done it-and I feel largely the same about the Kurdish program-it wouldn't have happened, because there was nobody else pushing for it.

Q: So your message is: junior officer, first tour, initiative welcome.

PATTERSON: Yes, absolutely. The consul general provided me the latitude to do it, and his moral support as well. Through this home study program, I think we had probably 100 or 150 Iranian children who were adopted by Americans.

Q: To your knowledge, until the occupation of the embassy, did the program continue?

PATTERSON: It did continue until things began to disintegrate and most of these American families left, the potential adopters and also the social workers who were doing the home studies.

Q: But there's nothing to say that program couldn't exist for adopting parents who were in the United States.

PATTERSON: That's true, and I should add that not all of the people who were adopting Iranian children were residents there. We had several families who came from the States and went through the same procedures. In fact, one of those families, while they were sitting in my waiting room on several occasions during the week of their immigrant visa application for their child, met a Vietnamese refugee woman who had somehow ended up in Tehran. The Americans liked her so much that they agreed to be her sponsor in the States. The last I knew they were still all friends living up in Massachusetts somewhere. That's one of the beauties of our work . . .

Q: So there you are, a tertiary catalyst.

PATTERSON: Yes.

Q: After Tehran and those very stimulating and taxing problems and charges for a first-tour officer, you went on to a departmental assignment. You went to a Latin American desk. What kind of a next step was that for you?

PATTERSON: It was a very good job, although it happened to be a job I did not enjoy very much. However in terms of expanding my horizons, it was an excellent situation. I was the second-string desk officer for Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador. There was one desk officer for each of those countries, and I was the back-up for all three. The difficulty was that I never got familiar enough with the issues in any one of those countries that I felt confident about my knowledge.

Q: Had you served in one of them?

PATTERSON: I had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia, and was quite comfortable in Spanish, but was not familiar with either Ecuador or Venezuela. I was in that office for only one year, and never did travel to the region. That was one reason I did not feel really on top of the issues. The other was that I was being shuffled from one desk to the other when there was a crisis or when somebody was on vacation or on travel.

Q: Did you feel that your talents were being used at all? Or were you treated as an uninformed junior officer?

PATTERSON: No, no. I was not treated as an uninformed junior officer. If anything, I was treated as somebody who was more competent than I felt, because I think they were hoping, really, that I knew more than I did. They needed somebody who was much more knowledgeable, so they just treated me as though I were.

Q: The alternatives were not very good for them. They had to look that way. You must have brought some experiences from Tehran, since the consular experiences were varied and certainly political in many ways. Did you see any of those experiences being used in your new job?

PATTERSON: I don't recall thinking that I had. In any consular case that came up, certainly I had some expertise that could be helpful, and I had some expertise from my Peace Corps experience. But there was not that much relationship, I think, between what I did in Tehran and what I did on the desk in Andean Affairs.

Q: What's behind my question is the question of some younger officers, especially those, going as consular-cone officers into a desk job, whether they're equipped for it or not. What was your feeling about that?

PATTERSON: I think they're as well equipped as anybody else is when they first start out on a desk job. They've got the smarts and they've got the capability. They may not have the factual knowledge, but I don't think many political officers have the factual knowledge either unless they've served in that country.

Q: Had you gone, for example, to the Iranian desk, you obviously would have had a lot to give.

PATTERSON: That's right.

Q: You moved, then, from that desk job to the visa office. So then you were back into consular work again. What was that all about?

PATTERSON: That was brought about largely by personal considerations. I wanted to work only half-time. At that time I had two young children, and my marriage was breaking up. It was just too much for me to work full-time and feel that I was doing a decent job with my kids with the additional emotional strain of the impending divorce. So I went to my personnel officer and said, "I need either to go to work half-time or to have a nervous breakdown."

Q: The latter isn't programmable.

PATTERSON: I felt it was close enough, and there were many days that I wished that I knew how to have a nervous breakdown, because that seemed like the only answer. (Laughs) But he was very helpful to me, and he said, "I think it's preferable for you to go to work half-time." I agreed. He said, "No Foreign Service Officer has ever asked about this before, so I'm not really sure if it can be done, but I will look into it." He did, and reported back, "None of the regulations prohibit it, so we will assume that it's permitted. But we will need to find you a position that will accept you for only half-day."

Then I contacted a very good friend of mine, a certain Bill Morgan, and said, "Here's my dilemma. Can you give me any advice?" He said, "Yes, there are several positions in the visa office that we could use you in," and described those to me.

Q: You better identify what I was doing then.

PATTERSON: You were the deputy director of the visa office at that time. You gave me three or four possibilities. I think at this time in the Department, such a thing would not be possible, because positions in the Department are so scarce and no office could afford to occupy a full-time position with somebody who's there only half-time. But at that time, there was more slack in the number of positions, so the Visa Office was able to take me on a half-time basis.

I earned half my salary, half of my leave hours, and it was all very straightforward.

Q: What did you do?

PATTERSON: I was the refugee officer, starting in the fall of 1977, which was when the Indo-Chinese refugee problem was getting into full swing. I worked for one year half-time, and then returned to full-time employment for two more years in that position.

Q: But the visa office isn't charged with refugees. There is an office that is responsible for refugee affairs.

PATTERSON: At that time, the Bureau of Refugee Affairs was just starting up. It had started up, actually, a couple of years before. But the division of labor was not clear. Clearly identifiable refugee groups were handled, in large part, by the refugee office. That meant most of the Indo-Chinese. But there were certain refugee programs for which the consular officers overseas did the pre-processing, much like what I described for the Kurdish program. The principal ones the Visa Office managed were those from the Soviet Union and Romania.

The reason they were handled by the consular officer was that those two refugee groups had to get exit permits from their own country in order to go someplace else to be processed as refugees. You cannot be processed as a refugee while you're in your own country, because by definition, a refugee is someone who has fled his own country out of a well-founded fear of persecution.

So those applicants for refugee status could not be processed in their own country. Once they were issued an exit permit and actually left, if they were not then granted entry by their intended country of destination, they were left in an untenable position, and the country that had issued them a transit visa to come be processed in that country was left holding the bag. So in order to assure the government of the country that was allowing these refugees to be processed there, which, in this case, was Austria, West Germany, or Italy, that we wouldn't leave large numbers of these people stranded there, the consular officers in Moscow and Bucharest did the pre-processing, to ensure that those destined to the U.S. met the requirements of our law and would in all likelihood be issued refugee visas to the U.S.

Q: That was a visa office supervisory function.

PATTERSON: Yes, overseeing the consular officers in Moscow and Bucharest, as well as working with INS regarding the final processing. In addition to those two programs, I got very much involved-this was a function of timing-in what now is called the Orderly Departure Program out of Vietnam. During my three years in this position, I spent probably 70% of my time in organizing that program. The stimulus for this program was the huge numbers of people coming out by boat, whose lives were being lost due to tragedies at sea or to piracy. We were trying to encourage Vietnamese, not to take to the boats, that they could wait in Vietnam and be processed out in an orderly fashion without risking their lives.

So we were negotiating through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees with the Vietnamese Government, to try to devise a system whereby we would agree to take certain numbers of people that the Vietnamese government agreed to let go. It was a very long negotiation process. The Vietnamese drew up lists of people they were willing to let go, and we drew up lists of people that we were willing to take. Our lists were based on either immigrant visa petitions that had been filed by relatives already here in the United States, or people that we knew about who were former employees of the U.S. Government or who had some connection with the United States.

Q: Previous entitlement, perhaps, before we left in 1975?

PATTERSON: Yes. Obviously we didn't have any organized file when we started out.

Q: Were you it?

PATTERSON: I was it. (Laughs) I was it initially. Now there's quite a large staff, especially at the Embassy in Bangkok, and this particular program has been taken over by the Bureau of Refugee Affairs.

Q: So this started as a half-time position in VO.

PATTERSON: With one person working half-time, who was also doing the other programs out of Eastern Europe. It's now developed into the rather substantial program handled out of Bangkok.

Q: And taken out of the visa officer responsibility, then.

PATTERSON: That's correct, except for those coming out of Vietnam who qualify for immigrant visas. But we had a lot of difficulties with the Vietnamese Govt., because their lists of people they wanted to get rid of, largely consisting of Chinese, and our lists of people we were willing to accept coincided almost not at all. It became a necessity to computerize the lists, so I got involved in finding somebody with computer expertise, a Foreign Service officer who was then assigned to Bangkok to start the process. Eventually, we got permission to send somebody into Vietnam, an American, but not a U.S. Government employee. We found a person working for a voluntary agency, who became an employee of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. He was permitted to go into Vietnam and essentially do what the consular officer does in Moscow or Bucharest, to interview the applicants, make sure they are really who they say they are, and that they met the requirements of the immigration law.

One of those qualifications is medical. That was difficult. We had a hard time finding medical facilities in Vietnam that were able to do the X-rays and all the tests to make sure they didn't have any contagious diseases. That required a whole operation just to send in X-ray film, because Vietnam had nothing that they could put into this.

Q: Is that program still going on?

PATTERSON: That program is going on, and it's a very major one. Many of the people coming in under this program now are the children of servicemen who were in Vietnam, and the families of these Amerasian Children. There may be one person who is the child of an American serviceman who comes out with his mother and six or eight younger siblings.

Q: These are the children who are not welcomed in Vietnam. What numbers are we talking about, looking back to when you started this? Thousands and thousands who have come out under this program?

PATTERSON: We're talking about thousands, maybe 20,000 or 30,000 people.

Q: Versus those who came by boat.

PATTERSON: Those who came by boat, we're talking about half a million, anyway.

Q: A much larger number.

PATTERSON: A much larger number. But the objective, I think, was a good one-trying to get the people not to take to the boats, not to become a burden on Thailand and Malaysia and the other countries in the area. The concept was for the individual's safety as well, as there was a great deal of piracy and loss of life to those fleeing by boat. In that regard, I think the program has been a good success, because the numbers of people exiting by boat has dropped considerably since the orderly departure program has become more routinized.

Q: More orderly.

PATTERSON: Yes.

Q: This whole subject, as well as some of your other experiences, bring to mind the fact that one word hasn't come up in all this, and that's Congress. These subjects are ones that Congress certainly has been, in principle, always interested in, in particular, Iran and the refugee programs that we run. What is your reaction? What is your conclusion, about relations with Congress, how they affected you, and how you dealt with them, be it on an individual case versus wide, broad, sweeping significances?

PATTERSON: I would say that by and large, my relations with Congress have not been positive ones. In my course at the War College, I have come to appreciate the role of Congress, but when we go back to personal experiences, I have to say that by and large I don't see Congress as a positive force. They weigh in on behalf of their constituent without bothering to take the time or the judgment to figure out whether that constituent's request is a valid one or not. So I think their response is always to say "yes" to the constituent, and if there's any disagreement between the constituent and the Foreign Service officer, the Foreign Service officer is presumed wrong, and the constituent is presumed right.

Q: No good experiences in this area, where they maybe brought to your attention something that needed to be brought to your attention through a case or a procedure?

PATTERSON: There probably has been a case or two like that, but I can't think of one. Secondly, when we're talking about larger issues, I feel that Congress, again, weighs in on behalf of the lobbying group that is the most powerful. There was no lobbying group for the Kurds; there is no lobbying group for the Ethiopian refugees; there was originally not much of a lobbying group for the Cambodians or the Laotians. There is a lobbying group for the Soviet Jews.

The assignment of U.S. refugee numbers is based, perhaps realistically, on the strength of the lobbying group here, but I don't think it's based ethically on who are in the most desperate need, who can best resettle in the United States, to whom do we have the most commitment, or who has no place else to go.

Q: In your three years in the visa office, when you dealt directly with the substance of the refugee programs, you never sat with congressmen or staff aides and had any kinder thoughts about their intentions?

PATTERSON: No.

Q: Okay. Let's move from the visa office to a very different experience in Environmental Affairs. Tell us what that was all about.

PATTERSON: That office is involved in trying to work out international agreements to protect the environment. It was quite an eye-opening change of work focus for me. There's a lot of scientific . . .

Q: Did you have any background at all for it?

PATTERSON: I had no background. This has been something I've repeated throughout my career, moving into jobs for which I seem to have little formal training, but an interest in the subject matter.

Q: Did you ask for that job?

PATTERSON: Yes, it was my first choice. I would like to add that throughout my career, ever since I've become aware enough of what I want to ask for it, the Department has given me my first choice every time.

Q: And you were accepted by the office you requested.

PATTERSON: Yes.

Q: In other words, you weren't looked at as a consular officer or an unqualified person in this particular job at Environmental Affairs.

PATTERSON: By no means. They accepted me eagerly. My particular portfolio in the environment office included the OECD Environment Committee, which was the most important way in which international environmental concerns were addressed, at least at that time. Other than the UN whose size slows down it efficiency, the OECD is the only international group that represents all of the developed countries (except the Warsaw Pact countries), including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Canada, the U.S., and the major European countries. Because the industrialized countries are the great polluters, that's where most of the issues of pollution control could be addressed most effectively. So the OECD Environment Committee was really key for the environment office.

My portfolio also included the issue of export of hazardous wastes and export of hazardous substances.

Q: Where did we export them to?

PATTERSON: We exported them to any country a company could find to unload their stuff. The most controversial cases involved the Third World.

Q: So this was really dumping.

PATTERSON: Absolutely.

Q: Nuclear?

PATTERSON: No. Nuclear wastes were handled differently than hazardous wastes. These were toxic wastes or dangerous products, but not nuclear. The issues between hazardous wastes and dangerous substances were really quite similar. The question was, do we owe the receiving country some kind of a notification that something we have decided is dangerous is headed its way?

When I started the job in the environment office, we were under the Carter Administration, and with their greater concern for ethical issues . . .

Q: Greater than the Reagan Administration, is that what you're saying?

PATTERSON: Greater than the Reagan Administration. And their greater concern as for our relations with underdeveloped countries, comparative to the influence of U.S. industries, on their policies, led them to develop a notification system for both wastes and products.

Q: Who was notifying whom of what?

PATTERSON: The U.S. Government was notifying the government of the receiving country. The U.S. government required the exporter to notify the appropriate governmental agency. In the case of wastes, it was the Environmental Protection Agency. In the case of substances, it was whichever agency was regulating that particular product, such as the Consumer Protection Agency. Those agencies, then, would notify my office, and we would notify the foreign country that such and such a substance is being shipped. Take the case of TRIS-treated nightwear. TRIS is a flame retardant found to produce cancer and taken off the U.S. market. Large quantities of this TRIS-treated fabric were then unloaded in Costa Rica and some other countries.

Q: Unloaded to be sold or unloaded to be destroyed?

PATTERSON: No, to be sold and used. Another egregious case was pacifiers which choked babies and were therefore outlawed in the United States. The companies then shipped their supplies off to other countries.

Q: Knowingly and purposefully?

PATTERSON: Oh, yes.

Q: Thereby endangering the lives?

PATTERSON: Yes, the implication being, "We don't care if your babies choke, but these are too dangerous for our babies."

Q: No U.S. laws that preclude that?

PATTERSON: There were no laws that precluded the export of either hazardous waste or hazardous products. What the Carter Administration was working towards and did implement was a notification system. Our companies felt that this put them at an unfair disadvantage because we were the only exporting country requiring such notification. So there again, it became an international issue to try to make notification to the govt. of the importing country a more standard procedure so that the West German companies or Japanese companies would be held to the same standards. We worked this issue through, again through the OECD, and were just getting started on it when there was a change in the administration.

When the Reagan Administration came in, they wanted to cancel all notification procedures because of pressure from U.S. industries. So all of a sudden, we had flip-flopped on the push that we were giving other countries to undertake similar notification procedures. The Reagan Administration reversed the policy on the notification of hazardous products, and said, "We will study the issue further."

Q: Like they "studied" acid rain for eight years?

PATTERSON: Yes. But they did not undo the notification procedure for the export of hazardous wastes. That still is going on, and it is really a necessary thing. There have been some terrible examples of proposed dumping of hazardous wastes in the Bahamas or Sierra Leone or Nicaragua, places where somebody on the receiving end, perhaps even a high government official, can make a quick buck, but if even the U.S. does not have safe ways to store or dispose of those wastes, you can be pretty sure that Third World countries doesn't either.

Q: But if the receiving country wants to take it, can we prohibit its being shipped to that country?

PATTERSON: No, no, we don't prohibit its being shipped. Many wastes are exported, for example, to Canada, where they can be properly disposed of. West Germany has some facilities for particular products. PCPs take a certain kind of incineration. So it makes good sense to export particular kinds of hazardous wastes to certain places. The idea is that export is not against the law, but that the receiving country should be notified in order either to take proper precautions or to preclude the entry into that country.

Q: It sounds like at the end of two years, you might have looked for the next assignment.

PATTERSON: Although I loved my work and believed in its importance, I was ready to leave that office at the end of my two years there, because working on these issues under the early Reagan years was terribly demoralizing. I was grateful to have the assignment to the consulate in Milan.

Q: So you got back to the real traditional consular assignment. You had four years there. What were your impressions of things new, that were different in the consular business, things that you hadn't experienced in Iran?

PATTERSON: The assignment in Milan was more pleasant in every way, shape, and form than my work in Tehran, but by the same token, it was less memorable. It was more routine and more sophisticated.

Q: Civilized?

PATTERSON: Civilized. That's the word I'm looking for. We didn't have many serious problems. We had some serious consular cases. I had a small number of very serious prisoner problems.

Q: Drugs?

PATTERSON: No. I had three female prisoners who had all committed murder, two of whom were in the criminal insane asylum, and the other was in a regular prison. I spent a lot of time on them, particularly on the one who was in the regular prison. She was a very high visibility case.

Q: In what sense?

PATTERSON: In the Italian press. She was a lovely, young American model, who had been abusing cocaine and whiskey, who allowed herself to be exploited by the lizards in the fashion community. She murdered a wealthy Italian playboy who had very prominent parents. It was a dynamite case for the press.

Q: So really, you're talking more about press relations than you are actually protecting her rights?

PATTERSON: No. She was exploited by the press, or allowed the press to exploit her, I would feel more comfortable in saying. She was very close to being a mental case, and even tried to commit suicide a couple of times. Following her arrest, I visited her at least once a week. My relations with her were much more on a protection basis than on a press-relations basis. The press never caught on to the fact that I was so involved with her. That was a real blessing, especially during her trial, which was held two years after her arrest, and much of which I attended.

Q: How were you protecting her?

PATTERSON: It was certainly not necessary to protect her from the Italian judicial system, because the Italian judicial system was perfectly above board, and the prison authorities were, in fact, doing everything that they could in their power to be helpful to her. One wonderful attribute of the Italians is that they take a personal approach to life, and are willing to bend rules when the situation calls for it.

I went to visit Terry often, especially initially during her confinement, because of her mental state. I tried to assist her personally, just as one human being to another. She had no one to talk with in the prison, because she spoke no Italian. She was in a terrible physical state because she had been using cocaine and whiskey heavily for at least two or three weeks prior to her committing this murder. So physically, she was a mess; emotionally, she was a mess; spiritually, she was in trouble.

I was able to arrange for an Anglican minister to come visit her, and he, too, became quite fond of Terry, and visits her regularly still.

Q: How old a person is she?

PATTERSON: At the time of the murder, she was 26 or 27. But she was not a sophisticated person. She was raised in South Carolina and had not really traveled much. She is one person that I feel truly has benefited from her time in prison. I feel she's a rehabilitated person, a totally changed person, because prison provided her protection and a structure. In the prison where she's been confined for the last three years, she's also found very supportive and constructive personnel, and a good job training program.

Q: What was her sentence? I take it she was found guilty and sentenced.

PATTERSON: She was found guilty and sentenced to 17 years in prison, which has subsequently been reduced to 14. After seven years, when she will have served half of her time, it is likely her case will be reviewed upon request of the prison authorities in view of her good behavior and her changed mental attitude and health.

Q: Sue, this story and some others that you have told us, reminds me of that famous dilemma consular officers often find themselves in. While they are not social workers, they are human beings working with human beings. How do you work out that balance between not being a social worker, not being a lawyer, not getting too involved, thereby performing consular functions, and at the same time satisfying all those normal human drives that one has to help a fellow man or woman?

PATTERSON: I think you cannot do a perfect job on that. The bottom line is if you're doing your job well, you do sometimes get emotionally involved. I certainly got emotionally involved with Terry, but I feel that in her case it was not counterproductive, because I didn't have to wage battle with the Italian judicial system. So there wasn't a conflict there.

Q: Where would there be a conflict?

PATTERSON: If I felt that she wasn't guilty and they had found her guilty, or if I had taken a position against the authorities and wanted her to be treated with favoritism, then that could have been going overboard depending on the circumstances.

Q: You don't think you were playing favorites to her by this extra special care?

PATTERSON: No, I don't feel that I was. Had I had a large prison population and my attention to her was depriving others, that would have been justified criticism. But I was in the enviable position of having only four or five prisoners, and she was at a prison right in Milan, so that going to visit her was not a two-day process as it is for some consular officers when they visit prisoners.

Q: Since this was, as you say, a civilized assignment, I take it the other parts of the consular responsibilities weren't too onerous or too heavy.

PATTERSON: No. We had quite a nice-size workload. We were happily busy, and a little over-busy many times of the year. Occasionally we had a slow day when we had a chance to catch up on paperwork. So it was a nicely staffed, appropriately staffed place.

Q: How about relationships with the rest of the consulate general?

PATTERSON: Those were good. We were advantaged by working in a small post, and were all in the same building, except for USIA and the commercial section. The consular section was in the same area with the principal officer, the deputy principal officer, and the administrative section, so there was good integration and communications. I felt a very good level of support. In fact, I have to say that with the exception of that very first supervisor I mentioned, my supervisors have been supportive of me, interested in my work, aware of what I was doing, what I was trying to do, and given me latitude to develop special projects that I wanted to pursue.

Q: And I could extend that, perhaps with the exception of the first tour, you felt as a consular officer doing consular work that you were an integral part of that mission.

PATTERSON: That's correct. I definitely felt an integral part of the mission and a very, very important part of that mission.

Q: Any other observations before we move on to your most recent assignment?

PATTERSON: Relations with the embassy, in terms of the consular work, were sometimes a little bit distant, but largely positive, too. I felt that if I had a particularly difficult case and wanted somebody else to bounce it off of, there were people at the embassy in Rome that I could call and say, "What do you think about this?"

Q: You got support, but perhaps not guidance.

PATTERSON: Not much guidance.

Q: Because there are a number of consulates general in Italy, five or six.

PATTERSON: At that time there were seven. After Mexico, we were the country with the largest number of consulates.

Q: And consular work being one of the primary functions of those posts, did the embassy try to integrate the work of all the consulates?

PATTERSON: We had two in-country consular conferences, which were very successful, very constructive. We also had an occasional visit from the counselor for consular affairs. Those were less helpful. By and large, I felt that we should go ahead and do the things that needed to be done. There was occasionally a thorny case (but less frequently as time went on) that I believed the embassy could help me with.

Q: So maybe you learned by doing.

PATTERSON: I think that happened.

Q: Let's move now to your last assignment, which again is out of consular work to a degree, the Bureau of International Narcotics Matters, INM. Now with all of these experiences, you must have brought some of them to this job. What was it all about? What did you do in INM?

PATTERSON: My position in INM was director of the Americas Division. I started in August of 1986, when cocaine was really high on the American screen. Cocaine comes only from South America. So I was really in a high-visibility position during my two years in INM.

Our objective was to get the cooperation of foreign governments in controlling the amount of drugs leaving or transiting their countries, destined for the United States. Most of the countries in the world are signatories to the UN Conventions on Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances, and most recently, the one on judicial matters relating to narcotics affairs. Nine countries produce most of the narcotics in the world, and six of those are in the Americas. By and large, the producing countries don't have the resources to effectively control the production of narcotics in their country. So the Congress has authorized a certain amount of money each year, administered by INM. This past year it was $100 million to the bureau, 70% of which was spent in the Americas.

Q: For what? What were you using that money for?

PATTERSON: For foreign assistance to these government, to increase their effectiveness in controlling narcotics. Much of this money was used for material for the police.

Q: Guns?

PATTERSON: Not guns. We are prohibited from providing lethal material. We could not provide anything that goes "bang," including dynamite to destroy clandestine airstrips. But we did provide helicopters or other aircraft, cars, communications equipment, boats, training, and other kinds of assistance such as public awareness information.

Q: Who supervised the use of that in the field?

PATTERSON: The bureau has its own people in 15 countries, and assistance provided to other countries is administered by Embassy personnel-DEA, political section or admin section people usually.

Q: Its own people? You mean you go out and hire them?

PATTERSON: No, there are Foreign Service officers who work for the Bureau of Narcotics stationed in nine foreign countries.

Q: Don't they work for the ambassador?

PATTERSON: Of course, they work for the ambassador. They are sent abroad with a full-time narcotics portfolio to oversee INM's programs and money.

Q: What is DEA? I always think of them as the principal enforcers of anti-drug measures. How do they fit into this?

PATTERSON: The mission of the DEA is principally to gather and analyze intelligence, so they work very closely with whatever arm within the police forces handles narcotics intelligence. The State Department's function is broader than that. It's to increase the capability of the host country to wage successful battle against narcotics, and that includes assistance for interdiction, which is what I was talking about, the provision of such things as airplanes and communications equipment, vehicles. Much of that is used to interdict drugs or destruction of laboratories abroad where drugs are produced. However, one of the principal objectives of the bureau is crop eradication. It is the most cost effective means of narcotics control.

Q: You mean burning up fields?

PATTERSON: Yes. Eradication of all narcotic crops is done most effectively through aerial application of herbicides. There are effective and environmentally safe herbicides for poppies and marijuana which are in widespread use, especially in Mexico and Colombia.

Q: This is not Agent Orange.

PATTERSON: No, they use much more benign herbicides, principally glyphosate. This is not Agent Orange. But with coca, from which cocaine is made we are just now finding a herbicide that is both effective and environmentally safe. It's been difficult to find an effective herbicide because coca is such a hearty, woody shrub-you can't kill it by destroying the leaves, which is the way most herbicides work. You have to find a systemic herbicide to kill it. Recently we've been doing some tests in Peru, and found four herbicides which are very effective in killing the coca bush and that also appear to be environmentally safe. We've conducted three or four test programs from ground application. Just last week Peru authorized an aerial test application, following which they will do the scientific analysis of the soil and water to see how the herbicide spreads. After a period of time, they'll take samples to see how long the herbicides are retained in the soil and if they spread into the streams and this kind of thing. The tests are really critical to establish environmental safety prior to undertaking a large-scale eradication program.

Q: This all sounds very positive and very hopeful, yet one reads all the time of the corruption of the foreign governments, at least their intimidation by interested parties in the countries. I presume you found yourself working on that issue, the political issue, if you will, within the countries?

PATTERSON: Yes, narcotics control is an extremely political issue. In the main producing countries such as Bolivia, Peru and Colombia, it's also a very important economic issue.

Q: I understand it comprises the largest part of the GNP in at least one of those countries.

PATTERSON: Experts estimate that in both Peru and Bolivia, the amount of money that comes into the country from cocaine rivals and maybe even exceeds their legal exports. It's not clear yet how much money made on drugs actually makes its way back into the local economy, but whatever it is, is not taxed, and therefore is not doing the government any direct good. It does tend to skew local economies in ways that haven't been analyzed very well yet. This is an important area of study that some of the economic sections are undertaking.

Q: Now that you are six months away from the job and you look dispassionately at it, do you fell optimistic? We now have a new drug czar [William Bennett], a new [George Bush] administration, perhaps a different approach. Do you think that part that you were involved in is going forward? Is there hope?

PATTERSON: I think the part that the State Department is involved in, assisting foreign countries to control the supply, is an important piece of the puzzle, but it's not the solution to the problem. INM's principal purpose is to try to keep the supply as low as possible in order to keep the price as high as possible, so that price becomes a factor in an individual's decision whether to use drugs or not. If crack costs $75 a hit, versus $5 a hit, price is a factor in the drug's popularity. When it costs, only $5, as I am told it does now, anybody can afford crack. I believe a high price is a desirable way to minimize the number of people using drugs.

However, I don't believe that we will ever solve the drug problem by wiping out the supply, and it is mystifying that an administration that has believed so strongly in market forces has totally suspended its faith in the law of supply and demand on this particular issue. They seem to think that you can cut out the supply, in spite of the fact that there continues to be a demand in this country. I think the United States is finally evolving a more realistic policy, which is the only way to resolve the problem, and that is to reduce the demand, at which point the supply will decrease.

I personally don't think drug abuse is a problem we will ever totally solve, but I do believe it's a problem that will decrease. It may take 30 years to happen though.

Q: But I sense that you do feel that that kind of work that you were doing in the State Department belongs there and should be continued. It is the kind of work for the State Department to do.

PATTERSON: It's an appropriate job for the State Department, but it's a very negative job. Our purpose is a repressive one, not building anything: We're trying to get these governments to dislocate their people and their economic underpinnings. For the countries heavily involved, such as Peru and Bolivia, it's the only product that they have yet found with a guaranteed market, and we're asking them to give that up without replacing it with anything.

This is where I think the United States' policy has a long ways to go. Our drug supply reduction policy has not really been thought through in a constructive fashion that might be successful. How do we really intend to encourage the governments? We want them to go in and eradicate their fields without providing any safety net to the cultivators. They will never be able to replace coca with another product that will bring them the same kind of income, because an illegal product costs more than a legal product. However, if you combine enforcement with provision of a reasonable substitute product, then we will be much more successful than we will ever be saying "Destroy this crop," without providing necessary development assistance.

I believe that the narcotics office has to work more constructively with AID and the Congress to come up with significant amounts of development assistance to underpin the success of the program.

Q: Rather than being assigned now to Mr. Bennett's new staff as czar, you're going off to Guatemala, to a more traditional consular assignment after many various experiences in your 15 years. Any last thoughts, Sue, before you take off?

PATTERSON: I'm looking forward to getting back into consular work. The consular field is always changing, and having been out of consular work for three years, and out of immigration visas for 14 years, I have a lot of catching up to do.

One of the joys of consular work is the daily variety. That and the amount of personal contact and the difference we can make in a person's life has brought me a lot of satisfaction. I have never regretted my choice in making the consular function my cone.

Q: And I thank you for the choice of having done this interview.

PATTERSON: Thank you, Bill.

End of interview